

A Catalogue of the Pictish Symbol Stones at Inverness Museum & Art Gallery



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Original version 1994, revised with additions 2010**

Photographs by Ewen Weatherspoon

The Picts & Pictland

The Picts lived in the east of Scotland, north of the Firth of Forth. They were the descendants of indigenous Iron Age tribes and the name 'Picti' or 'painted people' was given to them by the Romans. They had their own language, but it is not known what they called themselves. The only written evidence about the Picts comes from Ogham inscriptions on some of the carved stones, and lists of their kings, written in Latin.

Their skilled stone carvings tell us a little about their lives. The early incised symbol stones and the later cross slabs illustrate their gradual conversion to Christianity. From the sixth to the ninth century the Picts and the Irish of Argyll formed separate kingdoms. By the end of the ninth century they were united under the name 'The Men of Alba'. This joint kingdom eventually became part of modern Scotland.

Pictish Sculpture

Pictish sculpture can be roughly divided into four categories:

Incised symbol stones - pieces of natural undressed stone.

The unique Pictish symbols were incised on the smoothest face of natural boulders. These date from the 6th century.

Simple grave-markers - have a basic cross symbol. Again incised on natural stones, they date from the 7th century.

Cross slabs - shaped and dressed stone, carved in relief, displaying elaborately decorated crosses, symbols and figurative scenes, (7th - 9th centuries).

Christian monuments - cross-slabs, massive horizontal grave-markers, stone box shrines and internal architectural features, carved with the same range of designs as the symbol-bearing cross-slabs but without the symbols (8th - 9th centuries).

The Pictish stones in the collections of Inverness Museum & Art Gallery represent one of the most important groups of incised symbol stones in Scotland. All of the stones on display in the archaeology gallery belong to this group.

Incised stones are usually dated to the sixth or seventh century AD and are thought to have been carved before the spread of Christianity through Pictland. The conversion of the Picts was initiated by St Columba from his monastic foundation on Iona during the later sixth century. At this time, the Pictish kingdom extended across much of northern and eastern Scotland.

The meaning of both the animal and abstract symbols is unclear, although it is certain that at the time of their creation the message of the stones would have been readily apparent to people living throughout the Pictish kingdom.

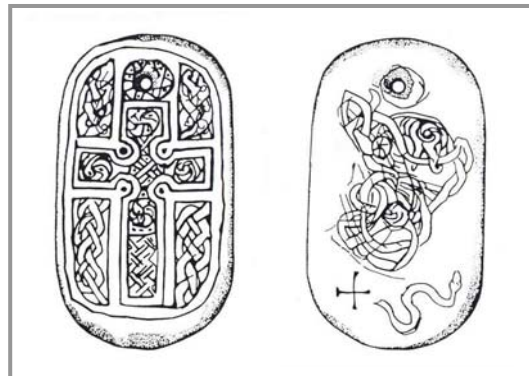
It is possible that some of the animal symbols represent different attributes, for example, snake = healing, bull = strength and the mirror and comb symbol is often thought to be associated with women. Some parallels have been drawn between some of the symbols (e.g. the eagle) and the decorative forms which appear within the illuminated Gospel books produced by monks of the early Christian church.

It has been suggested that some stones acted as grave markers, the symbols giving information on the status and family of the deceased. The stone from Garbeg (INVMG 1974.075) was found close to the site of a likely Pictish period cairn cemetery, but a direct link between symbol stones and burials has yet to be established.

Another possible function of the stones may lie in the commemoration of marriage alliances between important families or tribal groups, each party indicated by a different grouping of symbols from the standard set of images.

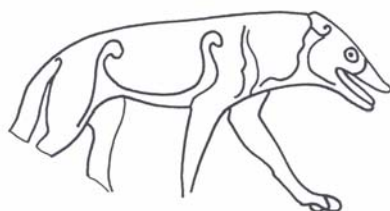
Pictish symbols are occasionally found on other objects, including jewellery.

A good example of this is the jet pendant from Beaulieu, on display in the Pictish case. The pendant is decorated with Pictish and Christian symbols of cross, snake and entwined beast. It is thought to date to the 8th century.



Pictish Animal Art

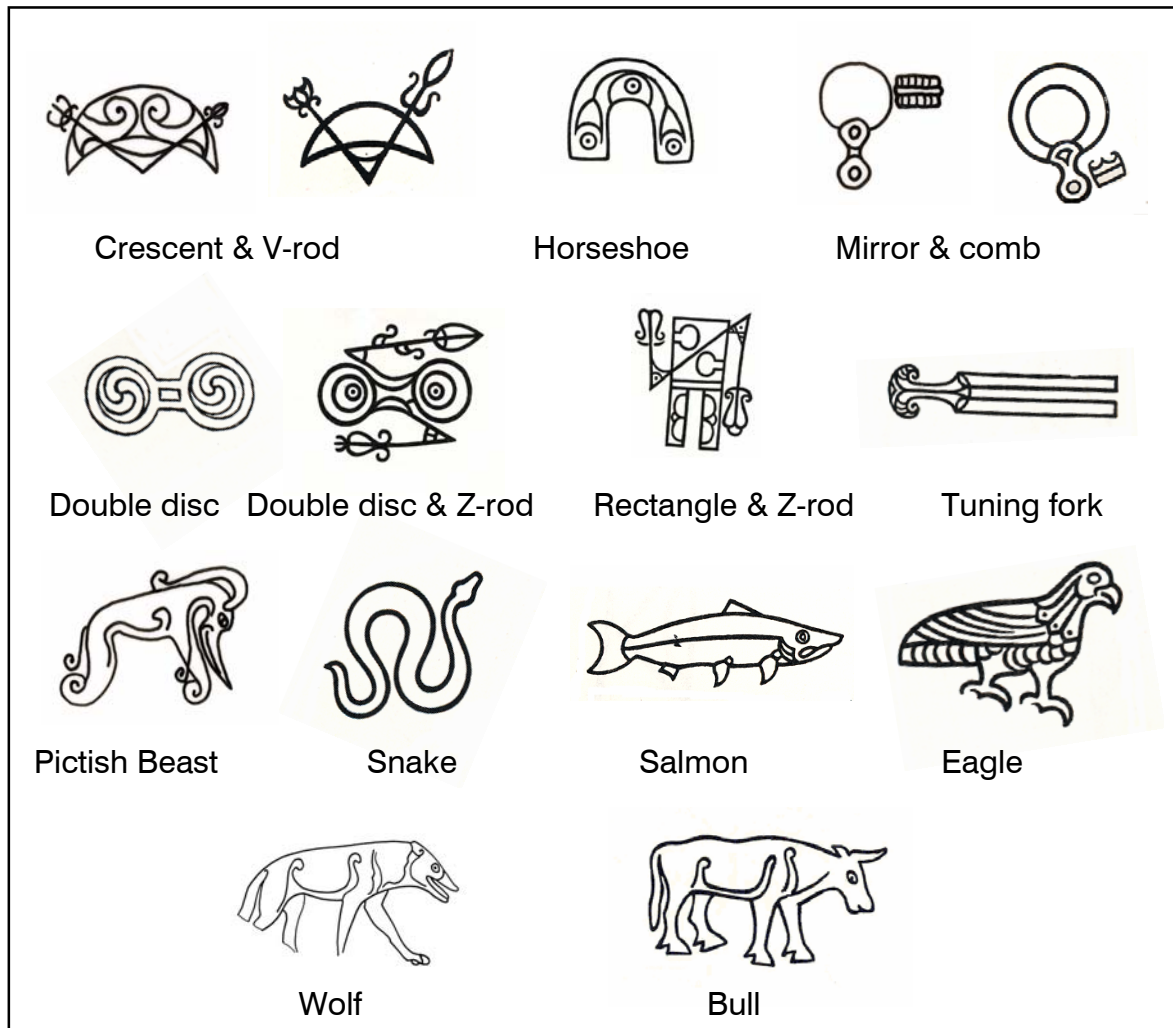
Pictish animal symbols are very accurately drawn and give a feel for the character of the animal. There is a gracefulness and sense of movement suggested by the figure of the Ardross Wolf. Scroll markings were used to emphasise the muscles and body structure. These markings were copied by early illuminators of the gospels; a good example is the calf image from the gospel of St Luke in the 8th century Echternach gospels, now in Paris.



Ardross Wolf, showing the characteristic scroll markings, which gives the image a powerful yet graceful appearance.

Pictish Symbols

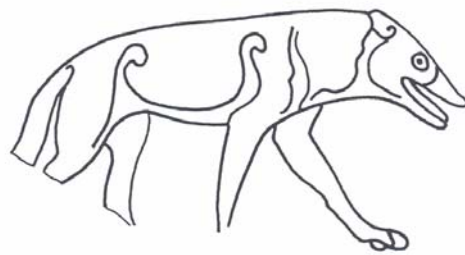
The following illustrations depict some of the symbols in use: some of these can be seen on the stones in the Pictish gallery. Examples of the other abstract and animal symbols can be found on many of the important Pictish stones throughout the Highlands.



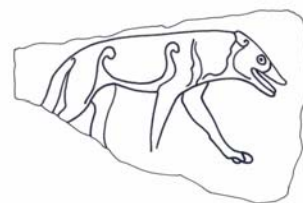
Pictish Cross Slabs

The earliest Pictish cross slabs date to the 8th century. They are carved in relief; the symbols and decoration are raised above the surface, not incised as in the earlier stones. Cross slabs were decorated with both Christian and Pictish imagery; it appears that Pictish symbols were perfectly acceptable for display alongside the Christian cross. Intricate interlace, spiral and key patterns are often used to decorate the cross and the internal areas of the symbols. Some important local examples can be found at Rosemarkie, Nigg, Shandwick, Dunrobin Castle and Brodie Castle.

CATALOGUE of Pictish Symbol Stones



INVMG 00.208 Ardross Wolf



Findspot: NH 67 SE
Stittenham, Ardross, Ross & Cromarty.

Detail: Found with INVMG 00.209 in 1903, built into an old wall

Description: Wolfstone, one of the most famous incised stones, the artist capturing the graceful movement of the animal with relatively few incised lines.

Dimensions: height 490 mm / width 310 mm / thickness 130 mm

Reference: Romilly Allen, J. & Anderson, J. (1903) p.55 & fig.53



INVMG 00.209 Ardross Beast



Findspot: NH 67 SE
 Stittenham, Ardross, Ross & Cromarty.

Detail: Found with INVMG 00.208 in 1903, built into an old wall.

Description: The head and neck of a graceful stylised beast. The style of the carving in the neck area suggests that this stone may have been created by the artist responsible for the wolf stone. The geological similarity of the two stones and the position of the carving suggest that they may have been on a single stone.

Dimensions: height 340 mm / width 315 mm / thickness 100 mm

Reference: Romilly Allen, J. & Anderson , J. (1903) p.55 & fig.53



INVMG 00.210

Kingsmills Bull



Findspot: NH 67 SE
Kingsmills, Inverness.

Detail: Found in use as a stepping stone to a cow byre

Description: A stylised bull carved with down-turned horns. A comparable series of bull carvings have been found at Burghead in Moray, but those animals emit a greater feeling of power and strength than the rather tame Inverness example.

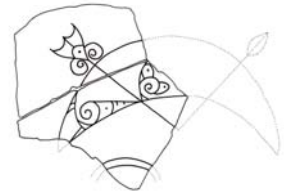
Dimensions: height 360 mm / width 315 mm / thickness 50 mm

Reference: Romilly Allen, J. & Anderson, J. (1903) p.102 & fig. 106



INVMG 00.211

Littleferry Links



Findspot:

NH 89 NW

Littleferry Links, Golspie, Sutherland.

Detail:

Unrecorded

Description:

When joined with the stone from Dunrobin Castle, the left hand portion of a Crescent & V-rod is clear. The top of the arm of the V-rod is decorated with a fork and spiral motif. Spirals, lobes and dots fill the crescent. Below the crescent, a double concentric line may represent the top of a Double Disc symbol.

Dimensions:

height 370 mm / width 260 mm / thickness 90 mm

Note:

Joins with a stone in the collections of Dunrobin Castle Museum, Golspie, Sutherland. The upper stone in this image is a replica.

References:

Romilly Allen, J. & Anderson, J. (1903) p.47 & fig.47
Harden, G.(1986)



INVMG 1937.041 Torgorm

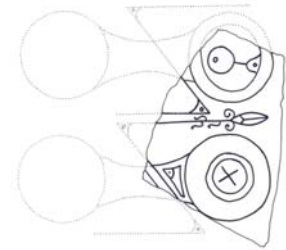
Findspot: NH 55 SE
Torgorm, Conon Bridge, Ross & Cromarty.

Detail: Found within ploughed field prior to 1903

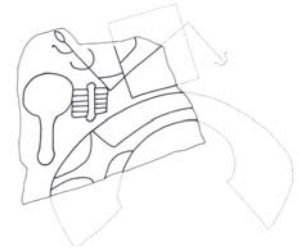
Description: The right hand portions of two double disc symbols, the lower with a cross motif at the hub, the upper with a joined circle and lobe of different design. Above the lower double disc is the top arm of a Z-rod, with characteristic spearhead terminal and attached spirals. Below the upper disc is the corner of a second Z-rod.

Dimensions: height 510 mm / width 330 mm / thickness 85 mm

Reference: Romilly Allen, J. & Anderson, J. (1903) p.106 & fig.110



INVMG 1955.030 Cullaird Farm



Findspot: NH 634 404
Cullaird Farm, Scaniport, Inverness.

Detail: Found during ploughing in 1955

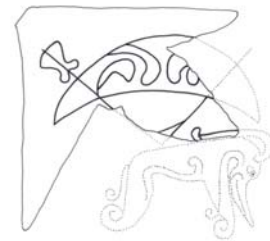
Description: A complete mirror & comb symbol sits below the left hand portion of a Z-rod, with spearhead terminal and attached spiral motifs. The Z-rod appears to cut a straight sided rectangle symbol. Beneath the mirror is the upper sweep of an arch decorated with curved infills.

Dimensions: height 390 mm / width 380 mm / thickness 65 mm

Reference: Stevenson (1959) p.39-40



INVMG 1974.075 Garbeg



Findspot: NH 511 319
Garbeg Farm, Drumnadrochit, Inverness.

Detail: Found within a disturbed stone cairn

Description: The left hand portion of a crescent & V-rod symbol, with lobed infill inside the crescent. The top of a symbol of uncertain type sits below the right point of the V-rod. It may represent the mane of a Pictish Beast facing right.

Dimensions: height 495 mm / width 490 mm / thickness 47 mm

Note: Findspot is within a probable Pictish cairn cemetery

Reference: Wedderburn & Grime (1984)



INVMG 1980.114 Wester Balblair



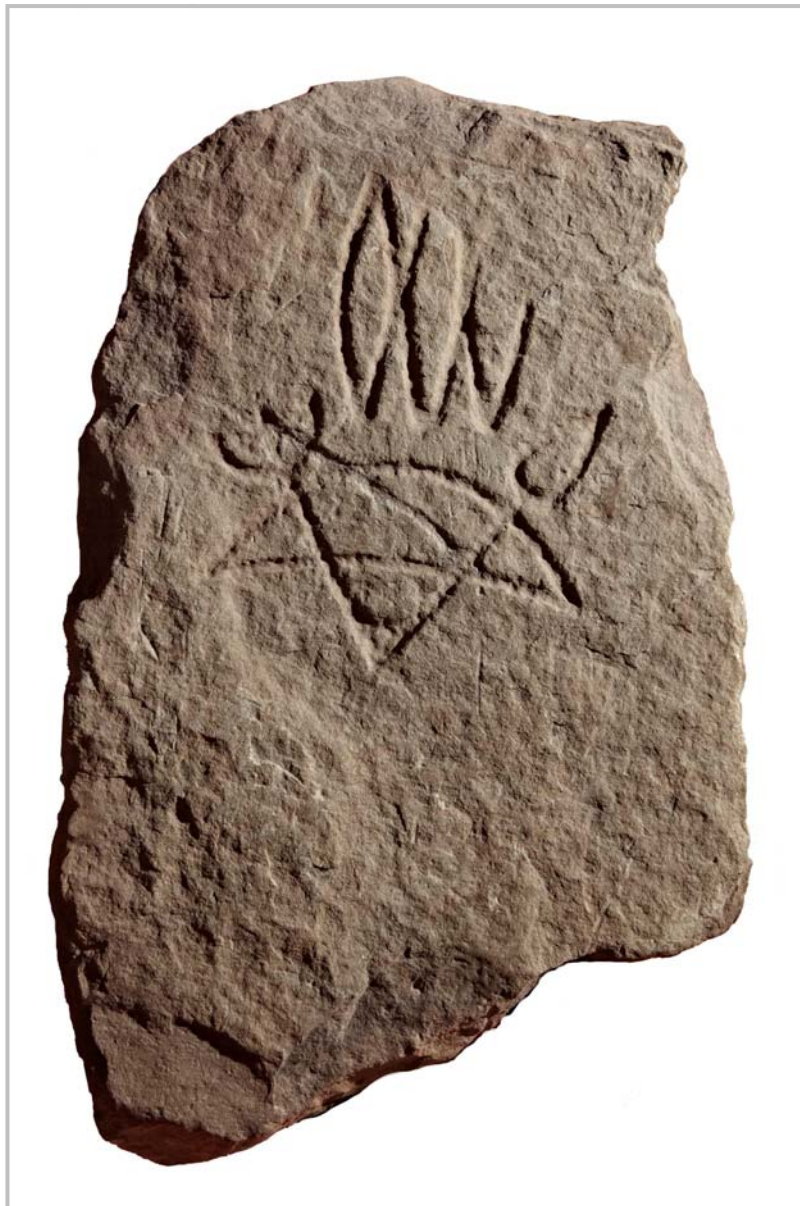
Findspot: NH 511 453
Wester Balblair, Beauly, Inverness.

Detail: Found during garden digging

Description: A complete crescent & V-rod symbol, with spearhead and forked terminals to the V-rod. Three conjoined ovals sit above.

Dimensions: height 760 mm / width 460 mm / thickness 110 mm

Reference: Cameron (1969)



INVMG 2002.013 Dalnavie

Findspot: NH 648 741
Dalnavie

Detail: Ploughed up in a field

Description: The surface of the sandstone is heavily eroded. There are three symbols, a step which appears as an inverted L shape, a crescent and V-rod, and a mirror and comb. The inverted L symbol is uncommon, but three Class I examples have been found in the area between the Dornoch and Cromarty Firths. The closest geographical parallel is on the stone from Ardjachie, now on display in Tain & District Museum.

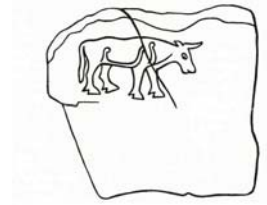
Dimensions: height 1190mm / width 390mm / thickness 85mm

Reference: Discovery & Excavation in Scotland, New Series (2002) Volume 3 p. 77



LOAN

Lochardil Bull



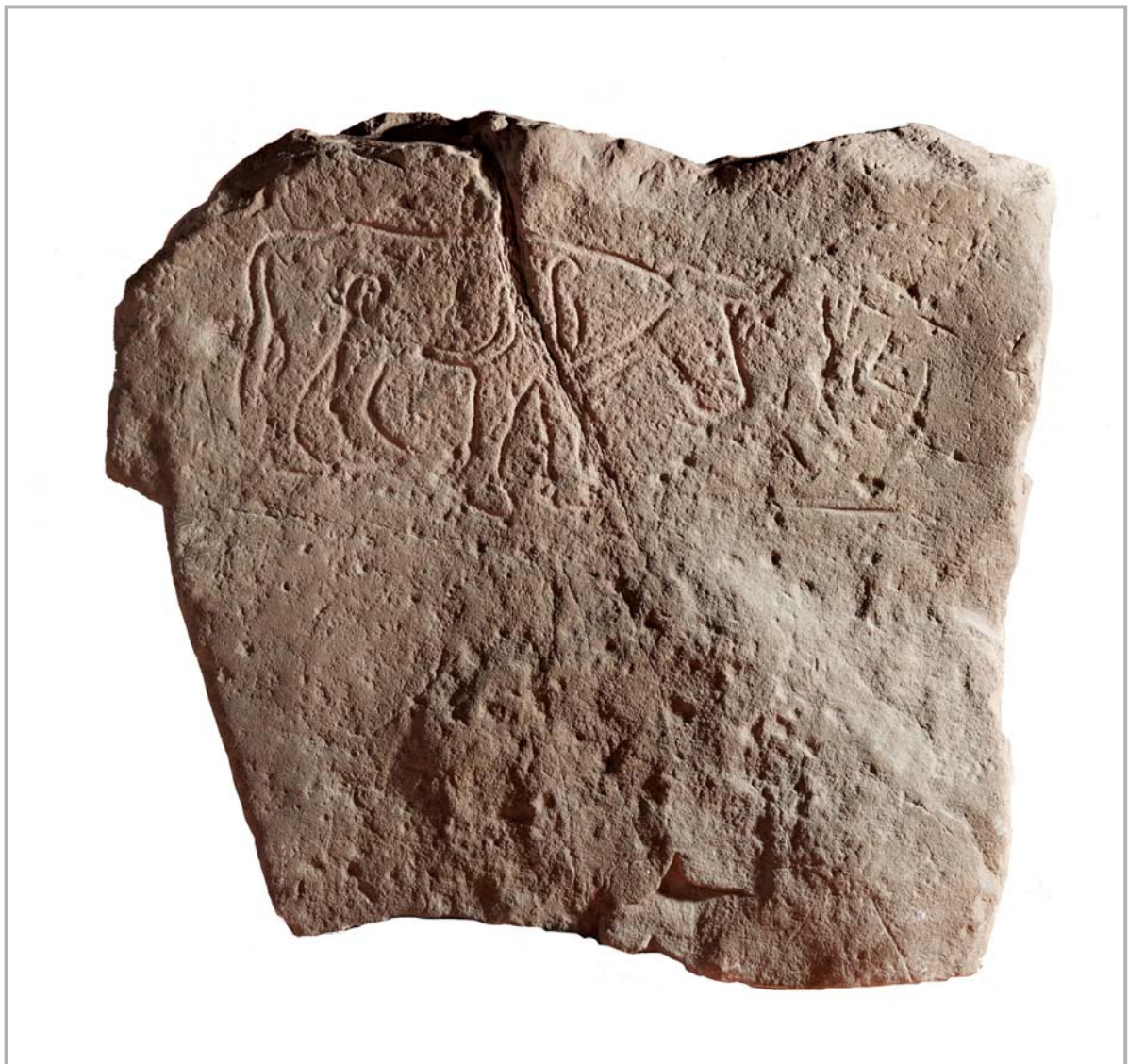
Findspot: NH 67 SE

Detail: Found in an old dyke in Inverness, then moved to the stables of a house in Lochardil.

Description: Incised figure of a bull, similar to those on the Burghead stones.

Dimensions: height 640mm / width 700mm / thickness 250mm

Reference: Romilly Allen, J. & Anderson, J. (1903) p.103 Fig.107



Knocknagael Boar Stone

On display at Highland Council Headquarters,
Ground floor entrance foyer.



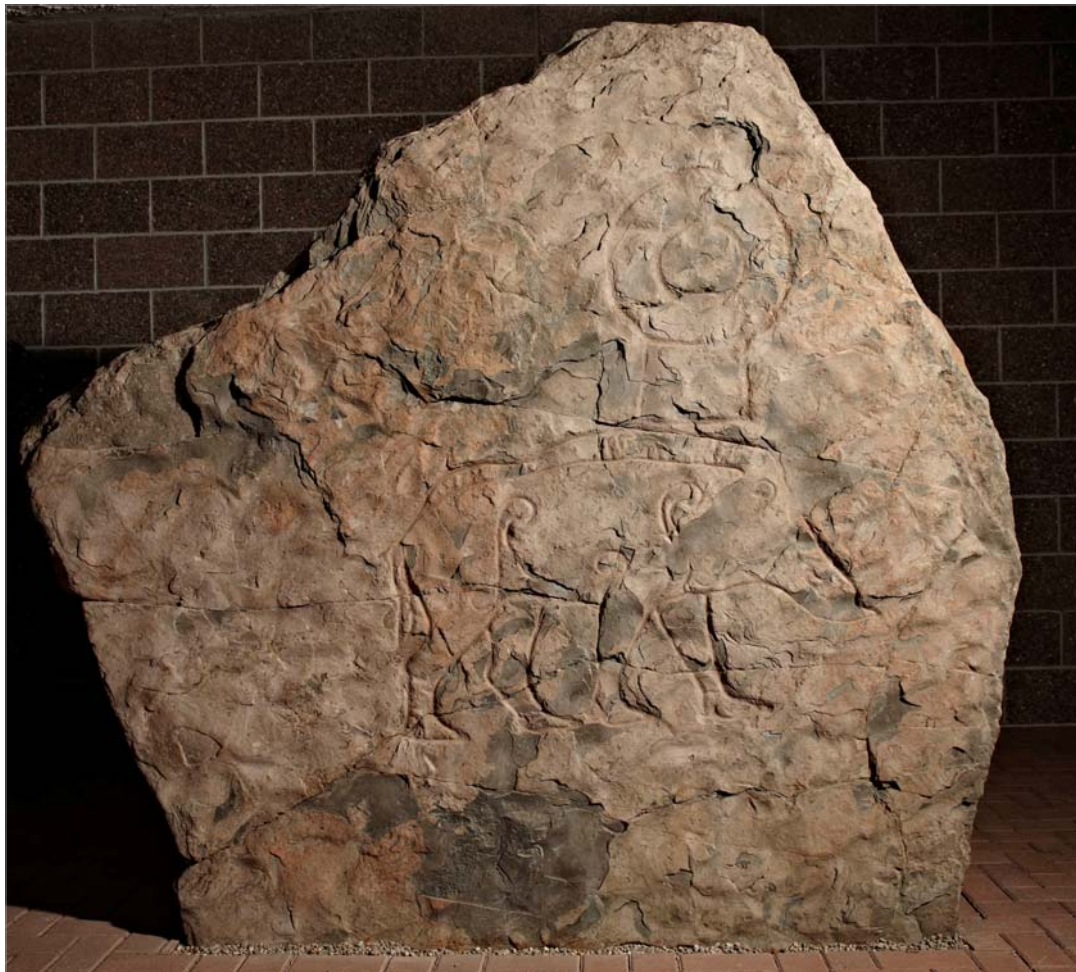
Findspot: NH 656 413
Knocknagael Farm

Detail: Due to concerns over its condition in 1991, the stone was conserved and moved to the foyer of the Highland Council Headquarters building

Description: The stone has an incised mirror case symbol ornamented with a circle and central dot to the top. Below is the figure of a wild boar, with decorative scrolling to represent the muscle structure.

Dimensions: height 2060mm / width 2185mm / thickness 345mm

Reference: Romilly Allen, J. & Anderson, J. (1903) p.103 /4& fig.108
Transactions of the Inverness Scientific Society & Field Club
vol 9, 1920 (p 154 - 169)



References:

Romilly Allen, J. & Anderson, J. (1903) **'The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland'**. Edinburgh

Butter, D.(1920) **'The Boar Stone'** Transactions of the Inverness Scientific Society & Field Club . Volume 9 p 154 - 169

Cameron, A.D. (1969) **"Pictish Symbol Stone at Wester Balblair, Beaully, Inverness-shire"** PSAS 101: 288-289

Harden, G. (1986) **'Another part of a Pictish Symbol Stone from Little Ferry Links, Golspie, Sutherland'** PSAS 116: 573 - 577

Stevenson, R.B.K. (1959) **'The Inchyra stone and some other unpublished Early Christian Monuments'** PSAS 92: 33-55

Wedderburn, L.M. & Grime, D.M. (1984) **'The Cairn Cemetery at Garbeg Drumnadrochit'** Friell, J.G.P. & Watson, W.G. (Ed)
"Pictish Studies" British Archaeological Reports 125:151-167

Weeks, P. & Brown, J. **'Dalnavie'** Discovery & Excavation in Scotland, New Series (2002), Volume 3, p. 77

abbreviated reference:

PSAS—Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland



PICTISH TRAIL



There are many other interesting Pictish stones to see:

INVERNESS AND THE ROSS & CROMARTY AREA

1. **The Knocknagael Boarstone**

A superb bull carving on display in the foyer of the Highland Council Headquarters Building, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness.

2. **Inverness Museum**

Collection of 10 incised Pictish stones, and Pictish jewellery.

3. **Groam House Museum**

A Pictish centre and museum at Rosemarkie on the Black Isle, containing a number of interesting stones. www.groamhouse.org.uk

4. **Dingwall**

Incised symbol stone at the entrance to St. Clement's Church.

5. **Eagle Stone**

Incised stone with an eagle, just off the A834 at the eastern end of Strathpeffer.

6. **Ardross stones**

The Wolf and Beast (thought to be a representation of either a deer or a horse) are in Inverness museum. There are copies at the new Ardross Hall.

7. **Rosskeen**

The Thief's Stone (Clach a 'Mheirlich), off the Alness to Invergordon Road.

8. **Nigg Stone**

Cross slab with symbols and biblical scenes, to be found in Nigg church.

9. **Shandwick Stone**

A fine example of a cross-slab, visible close to the fishing village of Balintore near Tain, Ross-shire.

10. **Hilton of Cadboll**

Cross slab, the original stone is on display at National Museums Scotland, and a carved reproduction of the stone can be seen outside St Mary's chapel at Cadboll.

11. **Tarbat Discovery Centre, Portmahomack.**

The site of a Pictish monastery, contains Pictish artefacts, stones and material recovered from excavations at the site. www.tarbat-discovery.co.uk

12. **Tain & District Museum**

Ardjachie stone and some Pictish stone fragments found in Edderton Church yard.

13. Edderton Churchyard

Cross slab with both celtic and latin style crosses, no Pictish symbols.

14. Edderton (Clach Biorach)

Incised stone with fish symbol, just off the A836 in Edderton village.

15. Ardgay

Grave marker with biblical scenes inside Kincardine old church.

16. Creich

St Demham's Cross, rough stone with an incised celtic cross.

17. Dunrobin Castle Museum

Golspie in Sutherland. contains a good collection of Pictish stones from south-east Sutherland.



MORAY AREA

18. Rodney's Stone

A cross slab sited in the grounds of Brodie Castle off the A96 .This stone also has traces of Ogam, a form of early Pictish writing, along the edges.

19.Sueno's Stone

A tall cross-slab decorated with a battle scene, located close to the A96 in Forres, Moray.

20. Elgin Cathedral

A cross slab with symbols, which can be found in the grounds of Elgin Cathedral.



Rodney's Stone, Brodie Castle.
© Imag



Cross Slab, Elgin Cathedral
© Imag

The Picts

Introductory & further reading:

- Close-Brooks, J. & Stevenson, R.B.K. 1982 **Dark Age Sculpture** HMSO
- Jackson, A. 1984 **The Symbol Stones of Scotland** Orkney Press
- Ritchie, A. 1989 **Picts** HMSO
- Sutherland, E. 1994 **In Search Of the Picts** Constable, London
- Forster, Sally. M 1996 **Picts, Gaels & Scots** Batsford, Historic Scotland
- Mack, A. 1997 **Field Guide to The Pictish Symbol Stones** Pinkfoot Press
- Carver, M. 1999 **Surviving in Symbols** Birlinn Ltd / Historic Scotland.
- Henderson, G. & Henderson, I. 2004 **The Art of the Picts** Thames & Hudson
- Ritchie, A. 2006 **People of Early Scotland** Pinkfoot Press
- Mack, A. 2007 **Symbols and Pictures** Pinkfoot Press
- Clarkson, T. 2008 **The Picts, a history**
- McHardy, S. 2010 **A New History of the Picts** Luath press

Useful Websites

- Highland Environmental Record www.her.highland.gov.uk
- Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments in Scotland www.rcahms.gov.uk
- Historic Scotland www.historic-scotland.gov.uk
- National Museums Scotland www.nms.ac.uk

